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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1664  
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RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0310  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0461  
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 0172  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0374  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0059  
RUEABND/DEA HQ WASHDC  
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RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2044  
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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL POLICE CONCERNED BY RISING OPIUM CULTIVATION IN  
DISTRICTS ALONG THE BANGLADESH BORDER

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the past three months, West Bengal Police have recovered 13 kilograms of opium worth USD 600,000, reflecting an apparent increase in illicit narcotic activity in the state. According to police officials, farmers in the state's Nadia district, lured by the prospect of higher returns, have diverted approximately 50,000 acre of land to illicit poppy cultivation. Although police have so far found no laboratory, a contact told post that poppy was being locally processed and trafficked to Nepal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and the Northeast. With the poppy sowing season starting in September, law enforcement agencies have threatened farmers with punitive action if they seek to cultivate illicit poppy. Post has not been able to corroborate the full extent of the acreage under illicit poppy cultivation but consensus among contacts clearly indicates an increase in illegal narcotics along the India-Bangladesh border. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a raid in early August, the Narcotics Cell of West Bengal Police's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) seized 4 kilogram of opium and 25 kilogram of poppy straw from a house in Nadia district's Tehatta block, located about 250 miles North of Kolkata. CID claimed that the opium recovered could produce 850 grams of heroin worth USD 240,000. The early August raid was part of a three-month drive by the CID that had already yielded 9 kilogram of opium seizures.

¶3. (SBU) On June 12, CID officers raided the house of Ganesh Biswas and Bijoy Biswas, residents of Satikhali village in Nadia, and found 2,200 gram of opium. The police arrested the two and charged them under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. On June 8, the CID arrested Safiqul Islam from the Uttar Nidhitarpura village of the neighboring Murshidabad district. About 550 grams of heroin was found. On May 22, the CID raided Abu Taleb Sheikh's house in Baruipara village, in Nadia, and seized 650 grams of opium. On May 16, the police raided a hotel at Bethuadahari in Nadia and arrested Nabin Mondal. The raid yielded 5,500 grams opium. Mondal was a resident of Plassey, in the same district.

¶4. (U) These raids, yielding 13 kilogram of opium in recent months, have prompted the police to believe that Nadia, Murshidabad and North 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal have turned into fertile grounds for opium trafficking, cultivation and production. In the previous year, the police arrested 200 people just in Nadia for their role in illicit opium trade and cultivation. The three districts are contiguous, located north of Kolkata, and all share international border with Bangladesh.

¶5. (U) The GOWB is becoming concerned about the emergence of these three border districts as major centers for illicit opium production. The CID, along with the Border Security Force (BSF), has warned the local village administrators to curb illicit cultivation or face penal action. Nadia district administration has identified four blocks - Tehatta, Karimpur, Kaliganj and Nakashipara - where it found that opium is being cultivated on a large scale. Media reports, quoting the police chief of Nadia, indicated that about 50,000 acres were already under illicit poppy cultivation in Nadia district.

¶6. (SBU) Contacts told post that the illicit cultivation in these districts started about five years ago. Farmers have been eager to use their field for opium cultivation as the returns were more lucrative than conventional cash crops. A 1.5-acre farm yields 1.5 kilogram of opium. Each kilogram of opium sells for between USD 750 and USD 850. The poppy sowing starts in September and the crop is harvested in March. Local officials working with the CID are seeking to crackdown on the cultivation prior to the next sowing season.

¶7. (SBU) The CID has offered little detail about the network that moves the produce from the fields. However, carriers arrested so far were bound either for Nepal, via the city of Siliguri by bus, or for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh by train. A

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contact told post that women are reportedly being used as carriers as the Seema Sasasthra Bal (SSB -- guarding the India-Nepal border) does not have women officers to conduct search and detain women carriers. Although no processing laboratories have been found, law enforcement contacts indicate that the poppy produced in these areas are locally processed.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The recent discovery of thousands of acres of farmland under illicit poppy cultivation in West Bengal comes as a surprise to local law enforcement and government officials. Post has not been able to assess whether the reports of such large areas of poppy cultivation are accurate but all sources indicate a significant increase in illegal narcotic activity in West Bengal and the number of recent arrests would appear to substantiate the fact that illegal poppy cultivation is on the rise in the state. In addition, much of the activity is occurring along the porous India-Bangladesh border, where smuggling and illegal cross-border movement is already pervasive. Also, West Bengal's northern town of Siliguri, the major urban center in the region, has been identified by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as a significant transit point for narcotics smuggling, given its serves as a transit point between East India, the Northeast, Nepal, Bangladesh and the rest of India.

JARDINE